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IN THE
WORK OF MISSIONS.

REV. JOHN L. NEVIUS.

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A S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE

SCOTCH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, NEW YORK.

MAY 5, 1867.

FOR THE

Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church,

BY THE

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OF THE NINGPO MISSION.

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EXODUS xiv. 15: "And the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward."

THESE words were addressed by Jehovah to Moses, and through him to the Israelites, at a time of extreme anxiety and peril. Just escaped from the land of Egypt, they found themselves surrounded by unanticipated dangers, more dreaded than the bondage from which they had been released. Before them was the Red Sea; and on either side impassable mountains; while the advancing hosts of the Egyptians were closing in upon their rear. In their alarm, they forgot the guiding pillar, the symbol of the presence and protection of their God, which still pointed onward, onward to the sea. Distrustful of God's providence, and overwhelmed with fear, they gave themselves up to murmurings and repinings; and looked back with longing eyes towards Egypt. It would seem from the narrative, that even Moses himself, though persuaded that God would interpose by his almighty power for their salvation, shared somewhat in the general perturbation, and was crying to God for blessings already promised, instead of leading on and encouraging the people in the performance of their duty. Under these circumstances, "the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward." As if to say, "this is the time for action,

not for affrighted outcry. It is only in the performance of duty, that the promised blessing of God can be secured."

It is sad to notice, even at this early period of the Church's history, the disposition to doubt and to disobey. But in these respects, as well as in others, the Jewish church was a truthful type of the Church in all ages. We have the same evil heart of unbelief, and it is well for us to inquire whether we may not be repeating their history? It is expressly declared of the events recorded in this history, that "all these things happened unto them for ensamples, and they are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come."

The great truth taught in my text is, *the importance of human agency co-operating with the divine in carrying out God's purposes*. God works in and by his people; and calls upon them to work with him. This duty is presented both in the form of a *reproof* and of a *command*.

I. Let us inquire in the first place as to the occasion or reason for this *reproof*; and also to what extent it is applicable to us, in view of the relations in which God has placed us, and the duties he has laid upon us.

1. The principal reason why God's displeasure was manifested towards the Israelites, seems to have been *their failure to understand the true relation which they sustained to him, and to perform the function which belonged to them in executing his plans*. He had delivered them from bondage; wrought signs and wonders among them; and entered into a covenant with them, promising to give them the land of Canaan for a possession, and requiring of them simple faith and obedience. Their error was, that, as God had done so much for them, they looked to him to do everything, and when they met difficulties, they hesitated and complained; seeking further direction and protection when none were needed, and pausing in the discharge of their duty to question the wisdom and faithfulness of God.

Now, the Angel of God's presence, who was with "the Church in the wilderness," leading Israel like a flock, has ever been leading his people through different eras in the world's history;

and he is leading us still. It is for us to inquire, What is now our position? What are our relations to God, to his Church, and to the world? and what the duties he has devolved upon us?

The Messiah promised to the Jews has long since appeared; and we, who were sinners of the Gentiles, are permitted to rejoice in his great salvation. We are blessed with a higher and clearer revelation, and more exceeding great and precious promises. We are called to engage in more glorious enterprises, and have laid upon us more solemn responsibilities. The great duty assigned to us is that of diffusing the knowledge of Christ's gospel through the whole world; a duty made obligatory upon us by the most specific commands, and remarkable providences. It was revealed, even in the Old Testament, that the Messiah should be for "a light unto the Gentiles," and "for salvation to the ends of the earth." The angels who heralded his coming, proclaimed on the hills of Judea, "Good tidings of great joy *which shall be for all people.*" But it was not yet clearly revealed how the joyful tidings should be made known to those for whom they were intended, and to whom, as a divinely conferred right, they belong. This question was settled by a special command of our Saviour, reserved to be the last, and uttered under the most solemn and impressive circumstances; when, leaving the scenes of his humiliation, and his finished work, he ascended up into heaven in the presence of his disciples. Those solemn words, recorded by the pen of inspiration, have been sounding in the ears of the Church ever since; and they come to us to-night with unimpaired authority. "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." "Ye shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." "And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Wonderful words! How unmistakable in their meaning—how authoritative in their tone—what stupendous results do they contemplate—what mighty responsibilities do they impose! They will never cease to be binding upon the

Church, and upon every Christian, until none shall have need to say to his brother, know the Lord, for all shall know him from the least unto the greatest.

But the *events of God's providence* conspire with the commands of his word to make our duty, if possible, still clearer. God is working wonders before our eyes, no less striking, and on a much larger scale, than in the times of the Israelites; and he is doing it in such a manner as to facilitate the performance of the work which he has given us to do. The ends of the earth are being brought together, and its scattered populations reunited into one brotherhood of nations. Old forms of civilization are passing away; and society is being re-established on a new basis. Wide and effectual doors are everywhere opened for the Church to enter. There is now no need to specify where doors are opened; the whole world lies before us white to the harvest. The Macedonian cry has found a thousand tongues, and comes to us from every nation under the whole heaven.

I would direct your attention for a moment to one of these nations in particular, the Chinese Empire; not only on account of my special interest in it as the place where I have labored as your missionary, and where I hope to spend my life; but on account of its intrinsic importance as a field for missionary enterprise, and its special claims upon us, growing out of our near relations to it. This empire presents to us a civilization more than twenty centuries old; and a population amounting to nearly one-third of the whole human family, all idolators. Foreign wars have partly dispelled the long cherished illusion that she sits queen of the nations, and is specially called to rule over and civilize them as inferior tributaries and vassals. These foreign wars, together with internal revolutions, have shaken her empire to its centre. Political and commercial intercourse, and the labors of Romish and Protestant missionaries, are introducing new ideas, and undermining the foundations upon which her government and social institutions have rested for thousands of years. She is starting from the slumber of ages, with her mighty millions, and her power of wealth and

intellect, to take her place in the family of nations, and join in the march of modern civilization. She is now in a condition to be reached, and influenced for good. All her provinces and territories are opened. By express treaty stipulations, Christianity is not only tolerated and protected, but almost recommended. This vast empire, and the adjacent nations of Corea and Japan, have become near neighbors to us; and in the future, our destinies are to be closely linked together. God has given them to us to lead in the paths of a Christian civilization. He has given us great facilities for communication with them; a commanding influence over them; and has poured into our lap abundant wealth for carrying on the work which he has given us to do.

With these significant providences, added to the most solemn and specific commands of our Saviour, what a fearful responsibility is laid upon us! We may truly say, without exaggeration, that there never has been such an opportunity to work with and for God and his Church. We seem to be approaching one of the great epochs, perhaps the last, in the world's history. Do we realize our position? Are we performing our duties? Are we not rather like them that sleep? Do we not deserve severer rebukes and judgments than those which were uttered against the Israelites? It is time for us to go forward; to come up to the help of the Lord against the mighty. Woe be to us, if, at such a juncture, and under such circumstances, we preach not the gospel of Christ to the heathen.

2. Another occasion for the reproof of the text was a *want of faith* on the part of the Israelites, and *their petulant fault-finding spirit*. The means employed seemed to them inappropriate, and inadequate to accomplish the end proposed. How should they, unarmed and unused to war, successfully oppose the hosts of the Egyptians? In what possible manner should they extricate themselves from the position into which they had been led? Of what use to them, in contending with real enemies of flesh and blood, were the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire? To their view, it seemed that there must have been some mistake; that this was not the way to salvation,

but to destruction. They murmured against Moses, and they murmured against God.

Is there not too much of this spirit in the Church at the present day? We hear Christians complaining that so little is accomplished. Some suggest the employment of other means than the simple preaching of the gospel. Some would sit still and wait for God to perform other wonders; or for Christianity to find its way to heathen lands through the channels of commercial intercourse, without any special effort on the part of the Church. Others find fault with missionaries, that they are not sufficiently laborious and self-sacrificing; while wonder is expressed by some that God does not, in answer to the prayers of the Church, vouchsafe a greater blessing.

Christian friends, there certainly can be no mistake in the plan which God has adopted, which is, I believe, the one followed by the Church. The failure to reach those results which we so much desire, and which God is willing to grant, may be more justly accounted for in a different way. The children of Israel found safety and success only in obedience to the will and commands of God. After crossing the Red Sea, they failed to enter the promised land, and turned back to the forty years wandering in the wilderness; and why? Because they would not go forward—because of their unbelief and disobedience. It was a failure or delay for which they, and they only, were responsible. Afterwards, the promised land was slowly and imperfectly conquered, for the same reason. And now, eighteen hundred years after the command of Christ to evangelize the nations, darkness still covers the earth, and gross darkness the people. The work moves on slowly; and the conquest of the world for Christ, and the promised millennium of glory, are still in the future. And it is a solemn question for us to answer—why? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he not promised to “give the heathen to his Son for his inheritance?” Is he not now assuring us by his providence that he is willing and waiting to lead on his Church to the possession of the world. I believe the Church is responsible for this seeming delay. We have not that faith which we should have, nor the

corresponding works and self-sacrificing devotion. While we are doubting, and complaining, the voice of God comes to us: "Bring ye all the tithes into the store-house, that there may be meat in my house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

3. Still another reason for the reproof of the text was the *inconsistency of the professions*, and the *insincerity of the prayers* of God's people. They cried unto God, but their prayers were not acceptable, simply because they were but the outward disguises of homage and worship, while their hearts were full of infidelity, worldliness, and disobedience.

In these days the duty of sending the gospel to the heathen is, theoretically at least, acknowledged. The highest judicatory of our Church, and also Synods and Presbyteries, have declared clearly and repeatedly that the work of Missions is one of supreme importance and solemn obligation; a duty resting upon every member of the Church individually. Christians generally acknowledge, at least by words, that they are "debtors both to the Greeks and to the Barbarians, both to the wise and to the unwise." Prayers are constantly offered, that God would send abroad his light and his truth; abolish idolatry and superstition; and fill the whole world with his glory. But, when we compare all these declarations, resolutions, professions, and prayers with what has really been done, are we not astonished at the remarkable want of correspondence. Or, to be more plain and specific. Within the memory of many now living, most of the nations of the heathen world denied to us the privilege of preaching to them the gospel; and the Church sent up to the throne of grace the oft repeated prayer that God would open the vast empires of the East to the introduction of his truth. Those prayers have been fully, literally, wonderfully answered. God made use of the military power of England, France, Russia, and the United States to accomplish this end; and scarcely anything is left to be desired in this regard. And now it is for us to show whether we were sincere

or not in offering those prayers. Did we really wish to enter those lands? Did we, or do we, earnestly desire to see the name of Jesus glorified, and these perishing millions made acquainted with his truth? I have heard Christians continuing to use the same stereotyped prayer, from mere force of habit; not thinking that, so far as this petition is concerned, the work of God is all done, and our work remains undone. I would by no means speak lightly of the prayers of God's people. The work of Missions is emphatically a work of prayer. But when many prayers are offered, as it almost seems, as a substitute for active service, they are not only useless, but a solemn mockery, offensive to God; and may well provoke the reproof of the text: "Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak to the children of Israel, that they go forward." God forbid, that by our apathy and inactivity we should voluntarily and unmistakably convict ourselves of insincerity and hypocrisy.

4. But it may be said by some, that the Church is doing her duty; and that the statements or intimations to which I have given expression are *extreme and unwarranted*. Far be it from me to indulge in the language or spirit of detraction or misrepresentation. But, called upon in the providence of God to address you on this occasion, on a subject which so nearly concerns the interests of the Redeemer's kingdom, and our own prosperity as a Church and as individuals, it is but proper that I speak plainly and unequivocally.

The question is one of fact. How far is the Church fulfilling her duty in giving her earnest sympathies, and prayers, and labors, and means, for sending the gospel to the heathen? I know that there are individuals in many of our churches who are doing, in comparison with others, nobly; it would almost seem, beyond their power; but what is the record of the Church at large? Here, I cannot indulge, on the whole, in congratulations, because I see no ground for them; except it be that our Church is doing a very little more than the little she has been doing for the past thirty years. Statistics show that her members give on an average considerably less than one dollar each to the cause of Foreign Missions annually. Or, to discriminate,

a few give generously; the most give very little; and very many give nothing at all. The proportion of each church-member is so near to nothing, that it is not worthy of being named, except as an evidence of our apathy and neglect. It is not the hundredth part of what the members of our Church spend for needless luxuries, and the frivolities of fashion. It is about the one-fortieth part of what many a poor laboring man, who can hardly furnish his family with the necessities of life, spends for *tobacco*. What a contrast is presented whenever we compare what the Church gives for Christ's cause, with what men give for other and worldly objects, when they are really interested and in earnest! All our contributions to different religious and benevolent objects combined, are far less a proportion of our incomes than was authoritatively required of the Jewish church, or than is now given by heathen nations for the support of idolatry. Our Foreign Board has been appealing to the churches for years for means to enable it to extend its operations into new and inviting fields; but it has been able to do but little more than to retain its footing in the old stations, and in doing this, we are closing the year with a debt of about thirty-five thousand dollars. These statements are important, not simply as showing how little money our Foreign Board has to disburse, but chiefly as the best indication we can have, of the degree of interest and sympathy which really exists in the hearts of Christians. The Church, with scriptural views of her duty, and a deep and lively sympathy with Christ in the travail of his soul over a lost world, might without difficulty increase her contributions tenfold. There are very few, even of the poorest, who could not afford to give at least one dollar per annum for the cause of Foreign Missions, without neglecting other objects of benevolence; while others could as easily give their tens and hundreds and thousands.

In this connection, other facts may be referred to as evidence of this general want of interest. With the whole heathen world before us, we have thirty times as many ministers laboring at home as abroad; and with the great want of laborers abroad, there are very many more ministers at home without

charges than the whole number representing us in the foreign field.

Again, the Monthly Concert, for want of interest in pastors, or people, or both, is in most places thinly attended; and in many instances, made up of the pastor, one or two elders, and a few devout women. The cases are not a few in which this meeting, which many churches have found so interesting, and so profitable, has been entirely discontinued. Many of our pastors, not to speak of the people, who find time and inclination to read the daily papers, hardly ever open our monthly missionary periodicals; and are unable to interest their congregations in the work of Missions, simply from want of interest and information themselves.

I find that in some churches the distinction is made between a Missionary sermon and a Gospel sermon; as if those sublime utterances of Isaiah, Paul, and the Saviour himself, which relate to Missions, were not a part of the gospel; and should not be made the themes of pulpit discourses, except on stated and special occasions, when those to whom these themes are distasteful would be at liberty to stay at home, or go elsewhere. How seldom is the doctrine presented and enforced as a necessary part of ordinary gospel preaching, that the Church of Christ is essentially a Missionary Church; that the New Testament is a Missionary Book; and that every disciple of Christ is under solemn vows and responsibilities to aid, as he has opportunity and ability, in this enterprise. Ministers of the gospel will sometimes discourse eloquently on the theme of "Paul at Athens preaching to Idolators;" and this is a favorite subject, as well it may be, for the Christian orator and painter; but how little is the heart of the Church stirred within her in contemplating the idolatry and spiritual destitution of the heathen nations of the present, which now contain thousands of cities filled with idols. Strange, that eighteen hundred years after the death of Christ, the greater part of the world's inhabitants should still be idolators; stranger still that that terrible fact can so slightly affect and disturb us.

We wonder that the Church was asleep half a century ago

on the subject of Missions; and we rejoice and thank God, as well we may, that we are now doing something; but I believe the wonder of those who come after us will be, that we are but half awake, and hardly beginning to do our work as we should.

II. The *command* of the text now claims our attention.

1. Moses was required to speak to the children of Israel *that they go forward*. The duty imposed could not be performed by Moses, or the Priests and Levites, or the Elders of Israel. Then, as now, it rested upon the whole company of God's people individually. Sharers in a common salvation, all subject to the same commands, identified in one body, and moving together as a unit, obedience from all was necessary; and we know how often remissness on the part of an individual, or family, affected disastrously the movements of the whole body. As our different Boards are only the instruments or channels through which the Church acts, they can only send out men and disburse funds as individual members of the Church make a voluntary consecration of themselves and their wealth to the Lord. If churches and Christians are apathetic and inactive, the sources of our supplies are dried up, and our work ceases. A striking illustration of the manner in which we should all co-operate in laboring for Christ, is furnished us by the history of the last war; when from every town, and hamlet, and fireside; and from societies, and voluntary organizations, came pouring in the needed contributions; till our armies swelled to hundreds of thousands, and our supplies to hundreds of millions. Thus, and only thus, was our country saved. And are the claims of Christ and his kingdom less binding upon us than those of our country? While we give so freely to Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's, shall we give so scantily and grudgingly to God the things that are God's? Having learned what our resources for accomplishing great things are, and having been laid under a new debt of gratitude to God for his protecting merey, should we not devote ourselves with the same zeal and energy, to waging war against the empire of Satan, and establishing that kingdom which is an everlasting kingdom?

2. While the people were required to go forward, the special charge to Moses was, *speak unto the children of Israel* that they go forward. Those who are the divinely appointed instructors and guides of the Church, are in a great measure responsible for her understanding and performing the duties which God requires of her. I believe that here is one of the sources, if not the principle source, of our difficulties. As we have no agents appointed in our Church to attend to the matter of presenting the claims of the Boards, and this duty has been left by the General Assembly in the hands of individual pastors, it should be attended to by them thoroughly, and conscientiously. In commending this subject to the attention of their people, they are not called upon to present any new plan, of human origin, and doubtful expediency; but simply to present the gospel as Christ taught it, and the Apostles preached it; giving to the work of Missions—the duty of personal consecration—and the doctrine of the stewardship of believers—the same prominence that the New Testament gives to these subjects. If there is a restiveness, and sensitiveness manifested on the part of some Christians when these duties are presented, there is all the more need that they be urged home with all their weight of divine authority.

Many of our churches are weak and dependent, and many Christians poor in this world's goods. These circumstances will excuse them from giving largely, but not from giving their due proportion, as God has prospered them. It is still their duty to do what they can; to move forward in unison and sympathy with the great body of God's people; to perform their function, however feeble; to acknowledge their duties by outward act; and to seek the approving smile and blessing of the Great Master, with, perhaps, that special benediction, "Verily I say unto you she has cast in more than they all." How many are there of the twelve hundred churches who contributed nothing at all the past year, who could not have given at least from ten to fifty dollars. An average from them of thirty dollars, would have left us free from the debt with which we are obliged to commence the next year.

3. Christian friends *we must go forward*. Our prosperity, if not our very existence as a Church, demands it. Our safety can only be secured by keeping pace with the onward march of God's providence, and walking with the light and protection of Jehovah's presence. Our position is like that of the Israelites. As the pillar of fire moved forward, not to advance with it, was to fall into the dark shadow which it threw behind it; to grope and stumble without a guide; to be swallowed up by the advancing hosts of God's enemies. There is danger, too, that the heathen nations, which are now being brought into such intimate relations with us, will, if we refuse to evangelize them, pour back upon us a tide of immorality and infidelity which we cannot resist. More than this, the wealth lavished upon self, which should be appropriated to supply the wants of others, will prove a curse rather than a blessing. The worldliness and selfishness now fostered and developed will produce their appropriate fruits, choking the growth of piety, and sapping the foundations of the Church. But our greatest danger is, that if we turn a deaf ear to the calls of God's word and of his providence; and to the cry of perishing millions for the bread of life, God will turn away his face from us, and treat us as we have treated him and his cause. What could we do for the advancement of the Church at home, and the spiritual welfare of our own people, with all our wealth and all our exertions, if God should withhold or take from us the influences of his Spirit? "With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again." "There is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty." "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, and lo I am with you."

4. The practical question may arise, *in what direction shall we go forward?* The Great Commission answers clearly, "Go ye into all the world." The providence of God points to wide doors opened everywhere and says: "Enter in and possess the world." The paramount claims of our own country must not be forgotten or neglected. In the great field before us, there are no rival claims, no conflicting interests. The work is one.

We must evangelize our country, that we may through it evangelize the heathen: we must evangelize the heathen, lest we fail to save our own country. Are we able to do such a work? Is it not presumption in us to undertake an enterprise of such vast proportions? Of ourselves, we can do nothing. The work is God's, as well as ours. His is all the power; his shall be all the glory. He might perform it without the intervention of human agency. He chooses however to work through us, and calls upon us to do nothing but what we *may* do. The part which we have to perform, may be as simple as the marching of the Israelites towards the sea; but the power of God accompanying his own appointed means will render them effectual. Though our work were still more difficult, and our enemies still more numerous, by God's help we are able to enter in and possess the land. We are not required to go to war at our own charges, or to fight in our own strength. This is our confidence, and this our glory: "The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge."

Christian friends, as we go forward in the discharge of duty, we have before us, as the ultimate result of our labors, and the great object of our faith and hope, the assured fact, that "the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord;" and that the Lord Jesus Christ "shall have dominion from sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth." This blessed hope is fitted to fire the highest ambition, and stimulate to the most earnest effort. We may differ as to the precise order and manner, in which the predicted events of the future are to take place; but as to the certainty of them, and the part which the Church has to perform in bringing them about, there can be no question. "*This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world, for a witness to all nations, and then shall the end come.*" Let us then be up and doing; quitting ourselves like men, and putting forth efforts in some degree commensurate with the great work to which God has called us; and God will go forth with us by the power of his Spirit, and "make bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."

